CROOKED ROADS: AI, IDENTITY, AND STAYING IN THE WORK

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Have you ever used AI for something and felt weird about it after?

Maybe you used it to draft an email. Maybe to outline a paper. Maybe just to get unstuck. Did you feel strange afterward? Like you weren't sure if what you did still counted as yours?

That "weird feeling"—I think that's the core of this whole conversation. After you sort through all of the surface-level pain points around AI usage—plagiarism policies, detection tools, guidelines—there's something deeper at stake. Identity.

When we use AI and feel weird, it's because we're asking: did I just outsource part of who I am? When students use AI, and teachers feel uneasy, we're asking: are they short-circuiting their identity as learners? When anyone—faculty, staff, administrators, students—worries about AI replacing them, it's the same question: does this tool support who I am, or does it erase me?

That question isn't new.

Blake and the Printing Press

You might remember William Blake from high school English— "Tyger Tyger, burning bright"—that Blake. This romantic poet, artist, and visionary lived in London in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Blake didn't just write poetry. He made books. He was an artist and a printer. To create his illuminated works, he had to use the technology of his time: the printing press.

Blake was creating at a moment when the printing press was treated as a kind of living technology. It was faster than human hands. Almost organic. And people genuinely worried it could overwhelm craft, judgment, and individuality. In 1814, *The Times* described the new printing press machinery as being "devised and arranged to relieve the human frame of its most laborious efforts in printing and in so doing far exceed all human powers in rapidity and dispatch." Sound familiar?

Blake was living through a moment of technological anxiety that feels a lot like ours. Now, I'm not trying to make a direct comparison between the printing press and artificial intelligence as technology, but I do think that how we use these technologies has some instructive comparatives. Blake used the press. He needed it to reproduce his work. But he refused to let its output stand on its own. As described by Philip Hoare (2025) in *William Blake and the Sea Monsters of Love*, Blake, alongside his wife Kate, painted over the prints. Reworked them. Altered colors, lines, and emphasis. The press produced something reproducible, and Blake insisted on intervention. The process produced mottled, spongy areas. Sometimes the color went over the edge of the design, slightly misaligned. You can see Blake's hand in the work, literally, in the imperfections, the variations, the choices. The result was a demand that creativity remain an active, human process.

The Real Risk

This is where I think we are with AI right now.

When I talk with students, with faculty, with anyone trying to navigate this moment, I try to emphasize: the real risk isn't that tools can generate text or images. The real risk is the temptation to treat what they produce as finished. To accept speed and polish as substitutes for judgment, intention, and care.

Blake gives us language for this, in his *Proverbs of Hell*:

"Improvement makes strait [sic] roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius."

AI output is that straight road. It's clean. It's efficient. It gets you from point A to point B. And so many people look at it and think—all right, good to go. Creativity doesn't have to disappear when tools become more powerful. But it does change if we stop working over what the tools give us and we let the straight road be good enough. Creativity lives in the crooked road, in the detours, in the mess. Working with AI, creativity lives in the decisions we make after the output appears.

What the Research Shows

An article in Nature by Brian Uzzi looks at how people use AI in creative tasks. Participants were asked to come up with ten words that are as different from each other as possible.

When people asked the AI to just give them the words, their scores were about average. They deferred to AI's answers. But when they asked AI for a process—a strategy for how to think about the problem—their creativity scores increased significantly. AI suggested: first, think of ten word categories. Then pick one word from each category. That simple framework preserved human choice while reducing the cognitive trap of getting stuck. When we ask AI what to think, we defer to it. When we ask AI how to think—for a framework, a process, a starting point—we stay in the creative driver's seat.

We can see this same dynamic in student work. Researchers describe moments called "integrative leaps"—points where students used AI suggestions but did not simply accept them. Instead, they worked to integrate them into their own developing ideas.

Across these examples, what students contributed becomes clear:

- Judgment—deciding which suggestions mattered and how to use them
- Interpretation—making sense of confusing or distant ideas
- Synthesis—integrating new ideas into an existing narrative
- Revision—reworking both the suggestion and their prior writing

AI-generated content. But the students generated meaning.

Staying in Relationship with the Work

For faculty, this research raises a follow-up question: how do we actually do that for our students? For ourselves? One place to start is by asking, in any given task: what do I most want to preserve here?

When people reflect on that question, the answers tend to be consistent: critical thinking, authentic voice, the struggle that leads to understanding, connection, and care. Those are the things that can't be outsourced without something meaningful being lost. Without that kind of clarity, it becomes easy to let AI flatten everything into the straight road. But once you know what matters most, you know where your intervention needs to happen.

Blake gave us this language more than 200 years ago. And it turns out, it's exactly what we need now.

References

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